

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 22

THE PRECEPTS OF THE CHURCH

Revised 8/9/05

INTRODUCTION

Jesus said: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind... and thy neighbor as thyself.”

Assuming that I do, what do I do about it? How do I put it into practice? Although the answer is vast and complicated, depending on circumstances and other things, the Church says that it boils down to six things, called the six precepts of the Church.

In our Lord’s command there are three parties to be loved: God, my neighbor, and myself.

I have two selves, my social self and my private self. That is, I am both a member of the human race (and the Church), and also I am myself.

So there are two ways for me to love God, two ways to love my neighbor, and two ways to love myself, thus six precepts.

I THE EUCHARIST

The first precept has to do with my love of God in social terms.

Jesus said: “Do this...” That is do the Eucharist.

In the prayer of Consecration in Rite I, we speak of the Eucharist as “this our bounden duty and service.”

From the time of the Apostles to the 16th century, no Christian would have thought of going to the church on Sunday to do anything in place of taking part in the offering of the Eucharist.

For about 90% of all Christians today--Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans—this is still the norm.

In apostolic times, if one was deliberately absent from the Eucharist on Sunday, he usually did not come back; it was considered to be such a serious repudiation of both God and the fellowship of the Church.

To miss the Eucharist unnecessarily on Sunday was always held to be a serious sin. Thus, there are only three real excuses for being absent:

- **Sickness.** It is a matter of one’s own judgment, but if one is not too sick to have gone to work on a weekday or to school, he is probably not too sick to go to church. Half of the world’s work gets done every day by people who are “not feeling very well”. If you are too sick to go to church, the priest will be happy to bring you Holy Communion if you ask.

It is not an excuse that you have out-of-town company or that you stayed out late Saturday night.

- Unavailability of the Eucharist. It is also a matter of judgment on one's part how far it is reasonable to travel.

However, there are places in the Philippines where Episcopalians travel all Saturday afternoon on foot through jungles, etc., to the village where the Eucharist will be celebrated, spend the night there, take part in the Eucharist, eat Sunday dinner, then walk home Sunday afternoon.

Morning or Evening Prayer are never substitutes for the Eucharist, no matter at what hour they are read, if the Eucharist is being celebrated at all.

- Conflict with a notable work of charity (that cannot be done later) . For example, nursing someone who cannot be left alone, or taking someone to the hospital in an emergency.

This includes people who have to work on Sunday for the public health and safety.

But under those circumstances it is your duty to ask your priest to celebrate the Eucharist at a time when you can attend.

Celebrations on Sunday other than the principal one, are for those who are prevented from coming to it, not just so they can go fishing, etc.

The ideal is one celebration in a place because more than one on a regular basis begins to undermine the very unity which the Eucharist is designed to strengthen.

The Eastern Orthodox feel so strongly about this that they forbid more than one celebration at a given altar or by the same priest on any one day.

By consensus of the members of the Church, as expressed in their practice over the centuries, five other days are considered to have the same rank and obligation as Sundays.

The obligation to go to the Eucharist on these days was not imposed or invented by the Pope or some other authority in the Church.

The following are the "holy days of obligation".

- Christmas Day, called also the Feast of the Nativity, or the Birth of Christ, which is celebrated in recognition of the beginning of his redeeming work.
- New Year's Day, called the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, or the Circumcision, which is celebrated in recognition of his being subject to the Law of the Old Covenant and as a hint of the Passion which awaited him.
- January 6, known as the Feast of the Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (which we were before our baptism). This feast celebrates the visit of the Wise Men and the Baptism of Jesus.

- Ascension Day, Thursday, forty days after Easter, on which we celebrate the taking of our humanity into Heaven as Christ, true Man and true God, returns to the Father.
- November 1, known as All Saints Day, on which we celebrate the triumph of Christ in redeemed humanity.

God has put his reputation in your hands. You are probably the best Christian somebody knows.

Your presence at the Eucharist is thus a witness. Everyone in church on a given Sunday will almost certainly have had an attack on his faith during the last six weeks. You know it is true, because it is true of yourself. One of the things which keeps their resolve at a high level is the other people they see there Sunday after Sunday.

Holy Communion is not only the uniting of yourself to Christ but also the uniting of yourself to all the others who are uniting themselves to him.

II DEVOUT COMMUNIONS

The second precept has to do with my love of God as an *individual*.

St. Paul says, “If ye do eat and drink the body and blood of Christ unworthily, ye do eat and drink damnation unto yourselves.”

The sacrament always has an effect on you, for good or for evil. If you are disposed towards evil, it will strengthen that disposition for evil, and vice-versa.

Therefore, you should spend at least a few minutes before the Eucharist begins to be sure that you

- have repented of all your sin;
- are in love and charity with your neighbor;
- intend to follow the new life in Christ.

After you have received Holy Communion, deliberately thank God for it. You may do this while the priest is taking the ablutions (doing the dishes) or after the dismissal.

Note: This is the reason for not talking in church just before or just after the service.

III SUPPORT OF THE CHURCH

The third precept has to do with my love of my neighbor in *social* terms.

We are a family. The Church is our mother. She has her faults as did my natural mother. But I am not going to talk about her faults to people outside the Church. We should have filial loyalty to her and also loyalty to each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

- The premises of the Church are our home. The parish hall is our living room. There is work to do around the place. Each of us should do his share.

This includes such things as altar guild, choir, work parties, and E. Y. C. (which stands for Episcopal Young Churchmen).

There is one organization in the parish which is especially important. It is the E. C. W. or Episcopal Church Women. Its purpose is to support the overall mission of the Church. But in particular, it serves to build up the sense of community within the congregation.

Just as the mothering function is essential to every healthy family, so is it essential to every healthy parish. The E. C. W. ministers especially in this way. Women of the E. C. W. serve as hostesses for parish dinners. They call on newcomers to make them feel at home in the parish. And in many subtle ways they serve to increase our sense of being a family.

Every woman is automatically a member of the E. C. W. by virtue of being an adult female communicant of the Episcopal Church.

- In every parish, there are small groups of people who are especially close to each other.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with this. They have the potential for a great deal of good. But they also can be very destructive.

For instance, in every parish there is a group which seems to always be involved in whatever is going on. If it is open to everyone who wants to be involved in whatever is going on, it can be a very good thing. But it needs to be ready to include everyone who wants in, and also to make that fact obvious.

Some groups of close friends are composed of both members and non-members. These groups offer a real opportunity for evangelism.

On the other hand, that kind of group can be competitive with the Church.

Such groups can appear to others as some kind of an elite, even without intending it. And when it is intentional, it is even worse.

- Not only do we not criticize "Mother" outside of the family, we also support "Daddy" (the priest) outside of the family. We do not criticize him in public or undermine his relationship with other people.
- One undertakes to bear his fair share of the expenses of the Church.

The Biblical standard is 10%, the tithe. No one who tithed over the long haul ever regretted it.

Everyone ought either to be supporting the Church or being supported by it.

For example, in a certain parish there was a woman with several children whose husband suddenly died. She wanted to keep on tithing, but she was having to pay for baby-sitters while she worked.

She mentioned it to her priest. He told the Vestry about it. The Vestry's answer was, "Tell

her to keep tithing, and we will take care of the children.”

That is the way it is supposed to work.

Perhaps it would have been even better, if they could have said “Tell her to stay home with the children, instead of going off to work. We will support her and the children.” Raising the parish’s children is certainly Christian ministry.

The priest has a “discretionary” fund through which money can be anonymously contributed for the support of members in need.

There are three fundamental reasons for giving money to the Church:

First, to express our gratitude to God for all his blessings;

Second, to declare by our actions that we recognize that all of it belongs to God;

To discipline our bodily appetites.

One’s pledge should be large enough so that it makes one careful in what he does with the rest of his money, which will have the effect of increasing his sense of being responsible to God for all of it.

If you can pay your pledge without batting an eye and without missing it, your pledge may be too small. If so, it should be increased until it puts a slight pressure on you.

If one is not presently tithing, he should increase the percentage he gives each year, if ever so slightly, until he is tithing.

IV CONFESSION

The fourth precept has to do with my love, as an individual, of my neighbor.

All of one’s relationships are to be kept in the context of love. And so, at the very least, I will make my confession whenever, because of grave sin, I need to do so.

V MARRIAGE

The fifth precept has to do with my love of myself in social terms.

One will strive to achieve and maintain a Christian family life.

VI FASTING AND ABSTINENCE

The sixth precept has to do with my love of myself the individual.

If I love myself as an individual, I will want for myself the same thing I would want for my child, that he would grow up and be a mature fully developed human being, that is to say, holy.

Frequently, there is a conflict between what I ought to do and what I want to do. More often

than not, what I should do is what I least feel like doing.

Being holy means being able to choose to do what I should even when I don't feel like it. The Church provides us with a drill, a set of exercises, to develop and maintain the ability to do just that. It is called fasting and abstinence.

Fasting means cutting down on the *quantity* of food one eats. There are strict fasts and light fasts.

During the forty days of Lent—Sundays are excluded—one eats two light meals and only one full meal.

On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, one has two “collations”. A collation is something just “thrown together”, that is, a snack. So you might have a solid and a liquid for breakfast and a light meal for supper.

That is to remind us of what those two days mean. And it is to remind us of what our Lord has done for us and what it cost him. It is also a way of entering, ever so slightly, into his passion.

So it is a way of worship and devotion.

Abstinence refers to the *quality* of the food one eats or does not eat.

One does not eat the flesh of warm-blooded animals on the Fridays of the year, except those which come during the seasons of Christmas and Easter. Every Friday is a little Good Friday.

Once upon a time the rule was to abstain from meat throughout the forty days of Lent. We really have it soft these days.

The 1928 Prayer Book set apart these days as specifically days of abstinence. The 1979 Prayer Book, in recognition of the fact that one frequently does not have control of his menu, simply calls them “days of devotion”.

The rule of reason always applies. And we should never be rude about such things. But when circumstances allow, we should observe “days of devotion” as days of abstinence from meat.

Besides these days of devotion, there are the Ember seasons which occur four times a year and are indicated on church calendars. They are always a Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.

At the Ember seasons, it is traditional to abstain from meat and to pray for the clergy of the Church.

Throughout history, and in most parts of the world today, meat has been strictly a luxury food and not a part of everyday diet.

A majority of the members of the Anglican Communion live in the third world and are black. For most of them, meat is still a luxury food.

Every Sunday of the year is a little Easter. It is always a feast day. It is the most appropriate day of the week for a party or a dance. Friday is the least appropriate.

RULE OF LIFE

A rule of life is an important part of one's efforts to become holy. It consists of the commitments one makes in regard to the following:

- The prayers to be said daily;
- What weekday celebrations of the Eucharist one will attend;
- What devotions one will use in preparation for and thanksgiving after Holy Communion
- When and how often one will make a sacramental confession;
- If, when, and how often one will make a meditation;
- How much study one will do and how often;
- And one's pledge to the Church.

In deciding on a rule of life, only include those things which you have already discovered that you can undertake to get done. If you think something should be included, try it out for a few weeks first, before you include it.

Your rule should be reviewed from time to time.

It is highly desirable to have what is called a "soul friend", or "spiritual director". This is someone with experience and some degree of maturity in the Christian faith, with whom you can compare notes. It may be your parish priest, but it doesn't need to be.

Those who are planning to be baptized or confirmed should discuss these matters with the priest.

Be prepared in advance for dry periods. Remember that there will be times when everything connected with the practice of the Christian religion will simply be work. You will feel like there is no point to it nor value in it. But your feelings are never a safe guide to reality. They cannot be trusted. Dry periods are the periods of greatest growth, if you keep at it.

MISCELLANY

A discussion of the organization of the parish, the diocese, and the national Church.

A discussion of the Church Calendar.

A summary and demonstration of ceremonial practices such as signing the cross, bowing, genuflecting, etc.

A demonstration of and commentary on the vestments.